



*'A story of deep tragedy,
remarkable resilience
and courage.'*

DAMIAN HALL

JEN SCOTNEY RUNNING THROUGH THE DARK

THE
RISE
AND
FALL
OF AN
ULTRARUNNER

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JEN SCOTNEY



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SPRING 2018

Planting the seed of running the Pennine Way can be pinpointed to an exact moment in time. It was 14 May 2018, 11 p.m., and I was flagging. The sun had long since set and the temperature was creeping down towards zero. I was on the North York Moors. I had run over 150 miles on forty-five minutes of sleep, and in the last two days, my meals had consisted of nothing more than a couple of bowls of cornflakes and some bars I was carrying. I was alone. And hallucinating. As I wearily trudged along the disused railway line high on the moors, towards the next checkpoint and the hope of hot food six miles away, hundreds of ghostly figures were pouring on to the track in front of me from both sides. Tufts of grass morphed into huge blond-haired heads accompanying me on my seemingly endless journey. My glances to the side would temporarily stop the hallucinations and I would either focus on the music coming through my headphones or talk to the hallucinations. I knew they weren't real and told them so. And then I focused on the task before me: running the Coast to Coast. I was currently the second woman in the 190-mile Northern Traverse race and heading to the final checkpoint before the last stretch to Robin Hood's Bay. I thought about how much harder the journey had been because of the race conditions. There was no support allowed in any form on the route, and I had spent most of the last 155 miles alone, with just my own thoughts and music as company. Which was fine, but it would have been much easier to lift my spirits if I had had fresh legs and been surrounded by friends to see me over the

miles. Instead of this forty-mile gap between checkpoints, I was imagining my husband, Marcus, meeting me in a van stocked with all the food and kit I needed on road crossings. I was hungry; the vegan food at the last two checkpoints had been limited, without the calories to get me fifteen miles never mind 150 ... I passed the time wondering, if I made the conditions as comfortable as possible, how much faster I could run the Coast to Coast, but nothing in me on that night was pushing me to do that route again in any rush. The paths had become familiar in a way that was pushing me elsewhere, and I knew where it was. My heart at that moment was pulling me to run the Pennine Way.

A flash, a seed planted and rooted in my mind. I switched my focus back to the track, the hallucinations in front of me, the beam of my head torch guiding me on the cold, solitary night across the moors to the sea. For me the finish of the Coast to Coast race should have been the pinnacle of my few years' running and I had hoped it would satisfy my need to run long distances. It was long – 190 miles long. It had the most beautiful start and finish on England's coast. It had a journey of mountains, fells and dales across three of England's most beautiful national parks. It had the poignancy of retracing the steps that my mum and I had made together on our walk of the route just after the deaths of my dad and John. I had expected tears at the end, tears of joy and a final release of emotion as I had revisited that journey all those years later as the strong and wiser person I had become. And maybe some of this emotion was there as I jogged down the final hill to the finish at Robin Hood's Bay, but the exhaustion had diluted such intense feelings. The reality was that as I stood with the medal around my neck, I knew my next journey. And it was back home, to my Peak District, to the place where it starts.

The Pennine Way has been entwined in my life as far back as I can remember. My parents would tell us stories from their walk, which became as familiar to us as any other home comfort: the song sheet they were given by the scouts in Keld, the shepherd they stayed with a few nights later, the person who warned them it was nearly a 'four-mile walk' to the train station after they had just walked 268 miles ... Their adventures were told over and over again, passed down to me, the next generation. I have my dad's handwritten diary of their walk. The thought of my parents putting all they needed on their backs and walking for two and a half weeks seemed like such a magical adventure and one I was

sure I would do as soon as I was old enough. Which I put at sixteen years old. Because clearly, that's old when you are still at primary school. But the years rolled by and once I was working, the luxury of taking over two weeks' leave just seemed impossible, so it was left unwalked. That's not to say it wasn't in my life ... Again the path crossed mine as I would see the wooden signposts popping up in my life, such as on a camping trip to Hadrian's Wall after a visit to the children's prison near there, a weekend in Malham, a walk from Edale while I lived in Manchester; it would be there to nudge me to its presence and whisper the stories of my childhood. Some steps along the route on my own walks were solemn, knowing I was following in the footsteps of my parents and imagining their own journey on this almost sacred ground.

I can't say running it was a lifelong ambition. It wouldn't have occurred to me that anyone could run 268 miles in one go, never mind myself. I saw my dad running the 26.2 miles of a road marathon and never questioned whether it was physically possible for a human to run further than that, knowing nothing about the roots of the marathon distance and supposing it was limited only by human endurance. The first time I heard of anyone running it, was as part of the Montane Spine Race when I was crewing Marcus on the Challenger. The full race is all of the Pennine Way, the Challenger is the first 108 miles from Edale to Hawes. Marcus had finished in first place, at the hall in Hawes, with Grant MacDonald coming in second, and then while Marcus was recovering, the Czech runner Pavel Paloncy, from the full Spine Race, came into the hall. I was in awe. This man had not only run 108 miles just behind Marcus and Grant, he was not even halfway through his race. Still another 160 miles to run and he was just calmly sitting with his feet in a bowl of warm water, eating some food and looking decidedly un-superhuman.

I don't need motivation from a race or challenge like the Pennine Way to run. Running is such a pleasure for me, and as I move in the changing landscapes it feels a necessity to run, rather than a chore in any way. As I started running again after the Northern Traverse, my mind should have been on my next race, Ut4M in the Alps in August, but I felt my mind drifting to finishing the Pennine Way, visions of me touching the Border Hotel at Kirk Yetholm, of me in the picture I have of my parents standing in that exact spot all those years ago in 1974. And I could feel pure

emotion picturing this scene, of standing there, after running the 268 miles, and I could feel the tears of joy welling up, and I knew what my heart was telling me: I knew I wouldn't be able to walk away without having done it, without running the Pennine Way.

I think that would have been enough for me to start the planning, the training and everything else that this attempt would take; I wasn't lacking in motivation for any of that. But what I was lacking were the answers to some of the whys. Why did this path draw me in? Was it just because of my parents, or was it the magic of the landscape, or was there more? And with these questions came a need to delve deeper, as while my family, friends and even husband may not understand the mystical pull this path had on me, I was not alone. I knew others had dedicated so much time to running this path, to setting records, to the point of obsession, and I wanted to know why – What did we share in this sense? What was pulling them? – and then I realised this wouldn't just be about the 268 miles from Edale to Scotland, this would be about me, my past, the past, as decades of runners followed this journey, and I expected the journey would be longer and deeper than the 268 miles. And the conversations began, quietly at first, as I wasn't confident to ask such great runners immediately about their feats or their dreams or failed attempts. But as my voice grew louder so did the stories I heard. I spoke to Mike Hartley, Joss Naylor, Brian Harney, Roger Baumeister, Tim Laney, and I devoured Mike Cudahy's book *Wild Trails to Far Horizons*. I heard stories of friendships, of dedication, of warmth and pain; the stories echoed some of mine and I tried to collect them, to give them a more solid form than tales passed from mouth to ear, than the finishing times, which give no indication of the dedication and inspiration it took to achieve them. It was time to start my own journey on the Pennine Way.

